

May 13, 2002

To: Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, Chairman
Supervisor Gloria Molina
Supervisor Yvonne Brathwaite Burke
Supervisor Don Knabe
Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich

From: David E. Janssen
Chief Administrative Officer

MOTION TO SUPPORT S. 543 (DOMENICI), MENTAL HEALTH EQUITABLE TREATMENT ACT OF 2001 (ITEM NO. 18, AGENDA OF MAY 14, 2002)

Item No. 18 on the May 14, 2002 Agenda is a motion by Supervisor Antonovich to send five-signature letters supporting S. 543 (Domenici, R-NM), the Mental Health Equitable Treatment Act of 2001, to President Bush and the County's Congressional delegation.

As reported by the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee on September 6, 2001, S. 543 would expand the Mental Health Parity Act (MHPA) of 1996 to ensure full parity in the coverage of mental health benefits by requiring insurers that offer mental health coverage to provide care and services similar to those for physical illnesses. It seeks to ensure that patients seeking mental health services are not forced to pay higher deductibles, copayments, or other expenses than those with physical illnesses and also would bar differential limits on the number of visits and days of coverage or scope of treatment for mental health versus physical illnesses. The bill only applies to plans that offer mental health benefits, does not require a plan to provide any specific mental health benefits, and exempts employers with 50 or fewer employees. It also requires a General Accounting Office study on the bill's impact on health insurance costs, access, and quality.

On April 29, 2002, President Bush endorsed the concept of mental health parity, but did not specifically endorse S. 543. The President indicated that he is working with the bill's author, Republican Senator Pete V. Domenici, to reach agreement on mental health parity legislation. Senate floor action on the bill has not yet been scheduled.

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The Department of Mental Health supports S. 543 because it would improve access to mental health care and allow insurers to make coverage decisions based on the degree of disability and impairment suffered by the patient. On August 9, 2001, I advised your Board that the County's Washington, D.C. advocates were supporting S. 543, based on policies included in the County's Federal Agenda of February 6, 2001 to support proposals which would expand or improve mental health coverage under health insurance programs. This same policy is included in the Federal Agenda adopted by your Board on February 5, 2002.

DEJ:GK
MT:md

c: Executive Officer, Board of Supervisors
 County Counsel
 Department of Mental Health